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THE MEDIA MARKET AND FREEDOM OF COMMUNICATION

Bosnian-Herzegovinian media twenty months after the end of the war

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Informative overview

A total of 490 media operate in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Of that, 270 are in the BiH Federation and 220 in the Republika Srpska. Five daily newspapers are published: three in Sarajevo (BiH Federation) and two in Banja Luka (Republika Srpska), as well as 11 weeklies. However, all these papers, except for several exceptions, have a very limited market, and therefore also a limited circulation, because there is still no complete freedom of movement and free distribution of the press in BiH.

Electronic media in particular have experienced an expansion. According to Media Plan data from Sarajevo in July of 1997, 156 local radio stations were broadcasting, as well as two cantonal TV stations in the BiH Federation and 50 local TV stations.

The BiH territory is covered by two state RTV networks: Radio Television BiH (Sarajevo) and TV Srpska (Pale – Banja Luka). Each of these two networks cover the territory of their entity, but cannot be viewed in the other entity. As a consequence of the political crisis initiated by the Republika Srpska president with the hardline Serb leadership in Pale, the Banja Luka TV studio separated from this network and now operates independently.

Almost three-fourths of BiH territory is covered by Zagreb-based Croatian Radio Television through transmitters from the neighboring state or relay stations set up on territories with majority Croat population. In BiH one can also view Serbian Television (Belgrade) through the network used by Pale-based Serb Television.

Almost half of all media are in private hands. The media privatization process in Bosnia started in 1990 but was interrupted by the war. Some media today do not have owners, which creates confusion in their development.

Freedom of communication in BiH is restricted primarily by the fact that in terms of communication, the media and information space is still divided into three wholes that do not correspond with one another: the Republika Srpska and the two regions in the BiH Federation controlled by Croat and Bosniak authorities respectively. All conflict

situations in BiH even now cause a war of words, especially between media influenced by mutually opposed ruling national parties.

Despite the media expansion, the media market in BiH is undeveloped. Few papers can support themselves from sale on the newsstands, and radio or TV stations from advertisements or taxes. Most media support themselves from donations. Political and technical barriers do not allow free distribution of the press in the entire territory of BiH. Alternative media and media of an independent orientation have only local significance. The RTV telecommunication system is divided into three separate systems, in which one of them, Sarajevo-based Radio Television BiH, still does not have access to the world using ground telecommunication links. There are three different legal systems in the three territories controlled by the three national parties and three national armies.

There is no freedom of communication without a free and open media market. There is no inter-cultural relationship or enrichment of the human spirit if so many obstacles stand before information and other media messages.

Zoran Udovičić, Media Plan**Report at the 9th International Scientific Media****Conference “Journalism and Intercultural Communication”****Dubrovnik/Croatia, 22 – 27 October 1997**

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues

I will start my report with a recollection of an event from the beginning of the war in Bosnia, in 1992. A terrorist attack was carried out on a popular music station in Sarajevo, Radio M. A group of young men broke into the studio, interrupted the program which was broadcasting popular folk music at that moment, and destroyed all equipment with bursts from “kalasnikovs.” Explanation: the radio station was broadcasting music from Serbia, the country responsible for the war in Bosnia. The owners justified themselves by saying that it was actually Bosnian music, which uses same or similar music motifs as commercial music in some other countries of the former Yugoslavia. Only several months later, the then-minister of culture in Sarajevo sent an internal memo to editors of all RTV stations on territory controlled by the Sarajevo government and asked them to ban broadcasting of music produced in enemy countries, that is music spots performed or written by people who had fled Bosnia.

While the attack on the station passed without particular public comments, the state’s move provoked reactions. Independent radio stations proclaimed it “Russian communist-style censorship,” because it requested the music editors to launch a process of investigating the national and political appropriateness of thousands of songs which could or could not be aired. State-controlled stations had already earlier carried out a revision of

their programming. RTV systems under Serb and Croat control also did something similar to that.

The decision to ban airing of programs which are not authentically Serb, Croat or Bosnian (sometimes also Moslem-Bosniak), could perhaps have been justified to a degree during the war with the political-propaganda needs of the parties to the conflict, especially those defending themselves from aggression. However, perseverance in this stand even today, in addition to all the bad consequences left by the war, is definitely turning into an anti-civilization act. Maybe it is not necessary to point out that the Bosnian tragedy occurred in the first place as a consequence of strongly expressed nationalisms. In their essence was a strong denial of everything belonging to others for the sake of one's own, destroying facilities of other nations' cultural tradition, imposing an information blockade, discarding from school text-books the politically inappropriate writers or writers of other nationalities, rigid changing of street names, removing words from the language which did not seem fit. For Bosnia-Herzegovina, historically and traditionally a country of three nations, this means the destruction of the basis on which it is able to exist. Thanks to that, Bosnia is today left without a significant part of its history and cultural past. We may or may not like the political systems we once lived in, we may or may not accept the states we once lived in, but history is not something we chose, it is something we have regardless of our wishes.

Destroying or denying the cultural values and traditions of those times, if they not abide by the criteria of the national and political options currently in power, verges on culturocide. In the Republika Srpska, only Serb writers from Bosnia are taught in school, all others were removed from books, in Croat municipalities of Bosnia children learn from textbooks published in Zagreb, and in Sarajevo, Mostar or Zenica the term B o s n i a n often hides only Bosniak-Moslem cultural tradition. Pre-war films and many TV serials have disappeared in bunkers. The three national cultural circles in Bosnia, depending on the national and political history of certain authors, have given up a whole

series of rock musicians who made up the well-known Sarajevo school, scientists, writers, painters, film and TV directors, actors...

The media made the biggest contribution to using history and culture as an instrument of politics. Many first served the aggression against Bosnia, then the greater-state aspirations of its neighbors, and in the end the national political leaderships. Instead of paving the way for restoring trust and establishing tolerance, the strongest media in Bosnia support tensions.

Responsibility for the information blockade which still exists in Bosnia, naturally lies first of all with the political leaderships, but also with the media in which, with the exception of several alternative and relatively independent ones, there is not much impetus for establishing a free flow of information and restoration of an intercultural ambiance.

Not one newspaper, due to political or technical obstacles, can be sold in all parts of Bosnia. Here are several illustrations. All newspapers from Croatia can be bought in Sarajevo, but there are no newspapers from the Republika Srpska or Yugoslavia. The distributors say they have no intention of distributing them for the time being nor do they accept such offers. The independent weekly Vreme from Belgrade has been withdrawn from a book shop, although it could have been bought there even during the war. Several street vendors sometimes have the Banja Luka-based Nezavisne Novine that this paper exchanges with the Sarajevo-based Večernje Novine, which started being sold in Banja Luka recently. It is interesting that Sarajevo distributors have such a politically selective position on the press, although this city is much more open in its electronic media, and even the cinema repertoire. Banja Luka, which has practically seceded from the rest of the Republika Srpska, has the currently most liberal situation concerning press distribution, because one can find, in addition to those from Yugoslavia, also some newspapers from the Federation, and even from Croatia, on the streets, in some newsstands, book shops

and reading rooms. However, the distribution of independent newspaper editions from Banja Luka, Bijeljina and Doboj (its local independent newspaper Alternativa was blown up by Serb extremists) is forbidden in some parts of the Serb entity.

Press from Sarajevo, East Mostar and Croatia is sold in East Mostar, but lately also a local newspaper (Horizont) from West Mostar. In West Mostar there is no daily press from Sarajevo, but in some newsstands one can find the Sarajevo-based weeklies Ljiljan and Slobodna Bosna. Media Plan surveyors asked newspaper sellers whether they would like to (dare to) sell newspapers from the other entity or states in which they have been at conflict with. Most answered they would if the employer asked them to do so.

Naturally, the strongest obstacle to intercultural communication are the strong electronic media that dictate the general cultural ambiance, based more or less on the principle of one territory, one people, one religion, one culture, one army, one leader etc. A favorable circumstance is that most of them can be viewed in a significant part of BiH territory, so this creates some sort of a plural media ambiance, although these media are mutually opposing and exclusive.

There is still no complete freedom of movement. Fear of unpleasantness, especially because no government has publicly guaranteed full freedom of movement, prevents people from traveling freely. Until a short while ago, there was even no telephone communication between the entities and all parts of BiH with neighboring countries.

A free media market is the main precondition for developing intercultural links. Political and other bans on distribution of the press and lack of connection of the telecommunication space are the main obstacles to the free flow of information. Contemporary users of information and cultural goods are crowded into entity and ethnic ghettos. This situation will continue until normal economic laws start to function and

until the principle of supply and demand starts to rule all markets, including media ones. However, today in Bosnia politics is an obstacle to both economy and the market.

Bosnian media before the war were part of not only the Yugoslav, but also the European media offer. After the war, their market has become too narrow. It is imprisoned by local, entity, national borders.

Foreign capital will soon enter into Bosnia's reconstruction. With it will come advertisers, who will want to be informed about the opportunities offered by the local media and to promote their interests and products. New satellite and computer technologies will crush the local borders, barriers and political restrictions. On satellites and the Internet, there is a whole world of information and cultural content which the local authorities want to use as political instruments with primitive methods. The media who do not prepare for the coming time will remain on the margins of these changes.

I will conclude that a free media market in Bosnia is the first precondition for achieving civilization ideals: to enjoy the values of our own cultural spirit and to be curious and open to the cultures of others.